DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 384 905 CS 214 972

AUTHOR Hurlbert, C. Mark
TITLE Affiliation and Innovation in Composition Theory: A Troubling Dialectic.
PUB DATE 17 Mar 88
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (39th, St. Louis, MO, March 17-19, 1988).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cooperation; Higher Education; Innovation; Literacy; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; *Writing Teachers
IDENTIFIERS *Composition Theory; Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

The Conference on College Communication and Composition brings together a potpourri of theoretical outlooks and approaches to teaching writing, but in fact many of the participants have much in common. They are all developing theoretical projects that, while they are not completely compatible, are all manifestations of a desire to innovate, to transform composition theory and literacy education. Many would be inclined to say they are on the margins of composition studies, but then there are at least three problems with such a claim. First, their work is probably not that original; it is far more likely that many educators at work on something similar. Second, it is nearly impossible to claim a marginal position when the center of composition studies itself is shifting according to the location of the observer. And third, the mainstream of composition studies continues to incorporate innovative and progressive theoretical projects into itself. Nevertheless, there is probably a difference between progressive composition scholars and the mainstream. If it is hard to detect at times, it is because those in the mainstream, while they continue to teach in traditional ways, incorporate the language of the margins into their discourse. It is imperative that instructors teach their students not only to be fluent and capable in writing for a variety of contexts but to be writers who have the confidence to open dialogues that may be liberating--that is, with the potential to stimulate the hard work of revising existing social contexts. (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 384 905

Affiliation and Innovation in Composition Theory: A Troubling Dialectic

C. Mark Hurlbert

ABSTRACT

Suggests the formation of a "bloc," an active and self-conscious affiliation of differing theoretical movements with practical goals for the transformation of literacy education in the American academy. Discusses the tension between affiliation and innovation and how composition instructors must transform themselves, their students, their programs and their institutions by encouraging students not only to be writers who are fluent and capable of writing for a variety of contexts, but to be writers who have the confidence to open liberating dialogues.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

C M Hurlbert

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS214972

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

C. Mark Hurlbert Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Paper presented in St. Louis, Missouri on 17 March 1988 at the session, "Theory in Practice in the Writing Class" as part of the 39th Annual Convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication

Affiliation and Innovation in Composition Theory: A Troubling Dialectic

In the position statement that John C. Hutchens wrote for inclusion in the CCCC election mailer last fall, he stated that CCCC is both a "moon flight," a glorious "intellectual excursion," and a "train collision," "a chaotic, maddening potpourri heaped ingloriously in untidy piles--a reflection of the other side of our professional lives."

As the last speaker on this panel, I recognize the truth in John C. Hutchens words. Like you, I have listened to a deconstructor, a pragmatic ethnographer, and a male feminist (if my colleagues will allow me to apply, for the sake of present discussion, such reductive labels to their work). And as if this representation of theoretical interests weren't chaotic enough, I am here as a writing teacher whose thinking is influenced, I hope, to a growing degree, by contemporary versions of Marxist theory. So you

see, we are "a potpourri." But it is also true that we are not "heaped ingloriously" together. Actually, my colleagues and I have much in common. We are all developing theoretical projects that, while they are not completely compatible, are all manifestations of a desire to innovate, to transform composition theory and literacy education. I am even tempted to say that my fellow panelists and I are all, in one way or another, speaking from the margins of composition studies. But even as I contemplate claiming this marginality, I recognize three problems, beyond the obvious hubris involved in making such a statement. First, our work is not particularly original; it is far more likely that many of you are developing similar projects. Second, it is nearly impossible to claim a marginal position when the center of composition studies, as Jasper Neel might remind me in good deconstructive fashion, shifts according to the location of the observer. And third, the mainstream of composition, as I recognize in my more optimistic moments, continues to incorporate theoretical projects like ours into theirs (And here lies a problem in definition. The field of composition studies is undergoing such rapid revision that I, for one, sometimes wonder whose work really represents the "mainstream." Of course, one can employ a short-hand method for defining the "mainstream," such as imagining a continuum of the twenty-five theorists who most often publish in CCC and College English and arranging their work on a continuum from left to right, according to their

political and theoretical affiliations. The problem with this method, of course, is its imprecision).

But even if I were able to determine the mainstream of composition studies, I am doubtful that I could rightly say that the theoretical projects developed by my colleagues and I are <u>really</u> being incorporated into the "mainstream's" flow. I pointed out in a recent issue of <u>Progressive Composition</u> that those teachers whom I know and consider progressive educators, and I would like, with proper humility, to count myself among them, are more and more often in the gratifying position of hearing composition theorists discussing issues with which they have struggled. At the same time, however, thinking that sounds familiar when uttered by "mainstream" educators, may not ultimately be the same thinking that progressive educators are doing. After all, while mainstream educators are beginning to discuss "the social nature of discourse," and even while this may be represent real gains for the discipline, such terms are being used to designate educational programs where the goal is to encourage students to become producers of conformist discourse whose purpose is to gain, for writers, the authority to speak within the existing capitalist hegemony, corporate marketplace, and academic institution, while other students are urged, however tacitly, to keep still (And I feel that any curriculum that says to students, "In order to address academics, you must address them only as they expect to be addressed," does just that). You see,

progressive educators also discuss "the social nature of discourse," but with significantly different objectives. As a term, "the social nature of discourse," can also refer to educational programs where the goal is to encourage students, not only to be writers who are fluent and capable of writing for a variety of contexts, but to be writers who have the confidence to open dialogues that may be liberating ones, ones that perhaps have the potential to stimulate the hard work of revising existing social contexts, including academic ones. The point is that even as progressive educators affiliate with "mainstream" composition theorists, both use the same words to signify different things.

Times such as these, when theorists are learning the pleasures and pains of self-scrutiny and perhaps self-absorption, are good moments for us to worry about our affiliations. In a new collection of essays entitled The Semiotic Challenge, Roland Barthes warns us about those who cling to affiliations and tradition, those who would keep classical rhetoric alive because it offers "access to what must be called a super-civilization: that of the historical and geographical West" (14). This, Barthes suggests, is one of the reasons for the "intellectual discredit" (39) of classical rhetoric. But even as Barthes' essay warns us about affiliation, conservativism, and fetishism, it also tells us that our understanding of rhetoric needs to be widened by innovation, through developing affiliations to other disciplines. Barthes wrote, "Yes, a history of

Rhetoric (as research, as book, as teaching) is today necessary, broadened by a new way of thinking (linguistics, semiology, historical science, psychoanalysis, Marxism)" (86). To this list our panel has added deconstruction, pragmatics, ethnography, and feminism. So much the better. But the point that I am trying to make today is that as long as the mainstream of our discipline remains unable to negotiate its affiliations and theories with the innovations of those working on composition's margins without violating the theoretical integrity of marginal work, those laboring on the margins need to cooperate in order to insure that the innovative quality of their work is not lost as it is incorporated by the mainstream.

Following Stanley Aronowitz's Gramscian interpretation of oppositional movements in America, I suggest that we on the panel represent what could become a "bloc," an active and self-conscious affiliation of differing theoretical movements with practical goals for the transformation of literacy education in the American academy. And we are not alone. As the masthead of Progressive Composition reads, "The Progressive Composition Caucus is made up of composition instructors who view writing as a potentially liberating activity and teach from a socialist-feminist perspective." These words also suggest to me the presence of ideas and forces that could likewise become a theoretical and political bloc; they make me feel the excitement of innovation, Hutchens' "moon flight," the "intellectual

excursion." At the same time, however, I think of the relation of this bloc to the mainstream of composition studies, and I perceive the "train collision," what Hutchens called "the disorder and confusion of conflicting professional and personal goals that have raced willy-nilly at one another with less than ideal results."

I do not expect ideal results, but I hope that we in composition will continue cross-disciplinary critical thinking and dialogue. As we do, we may seek innovations that will not merely affirm the affiliations which unite us with each other, but ones that will transform, against the forces that resist revision and to whatever extent we can, ourselves, our students, our programs, and our institutions. And while at this point it may seem as if my paper has a happy ending, it does not, or better, it does and it doesn't. The dialectic that both unites us to and separates us from the mainstream of our discipline also operates within our political and theoretical affiliations, so that we must keep learning to live with the creative and debilitating tension between affiliation and innovation. The point is that we must constantly scrutinize even those affiliations that most give us a sense of place and purpose, and we must be prepared to negate them when the time comes that <u>they</u> threaten the theoretical integrity of innovation.

Works Cited

Aronowitz, Stanley. The Crisis in Historical Materialism: Class, Politics, and Culture in Marxist Theory. New York: Praeger, 1981.

Barthes, Roland. "The Old Rheto ic: an aide-mémoire." The Semiotic Challenge. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1988. 11-94.

Gramsci, Antonio. Selections from the Prison Notebooks. New York: International Publishers, 1971.

Hurlbert, C. Mark. "Radical Rhetoricians, Heal Thyselves: Chaim Perelman, Education and Propaganda." Progressive Composition (March 1988): 7-8.